Plato and Darwin

A Philosophic Dialogue

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A Philosophic Dialogue

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TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY THE
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INTRODUCTORY

'WHAT more arbitrary or less justifiable, less applicable to reality . . than the superficial device of an orthodoxy untrue to its first principles, which aims at a separation between ecclesiastical dogmas, classifying them, on the one hand as fundamental, and on the other as accessory or even superfluous? In the name of what authority is this distinction made? Who does not see,

with a little reflection, that the line of demarcation which is sought for runs, not between dogmas to divide one from another, but within each dogma, between the religious content which must be safeguarded and the symbolical expression which may vary indefinitely.'[1]

This passage may perhaps be looked upon as the last word of M. Sabatier on a subject to which he has devoted a lifetime. It is almost certain that many who are interested in the present work will have read the *Esquisse d'une Philosophie de la*

[1] *Esquisse d'une Philosophie de la Religion*, etc. (pp. 403–4), by Auguste Sabatier, Professor at the University of Paris, Dean of the Faculty of Protestant Theology (4th edition, Paris, Fischbacher, 1897).

Religion, which has, for some time, been before the British public in the form of an English translation. To those who have done so, the Abbé Hébert's pamphlet will appear as a striking commentary on many of M. Sabatier's criticisms of Catholic Theology.

The following dialogue first appeared in the *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne* (May 1893), under the title:—'Platon et Darwin—Dialogue Philosophique.' It thus precedes the *Esquisse* by some three or four years. If the present editor is right in his estimate of the above-quoted passage from that work, he is justified in concluding that M. Sabatier's main thesis was already

before the public when he wrote, and that the essay which contained it was from the hand of a Catholic priest.

Nevertheless, there is a profound difference, in scope and in fulfilment, between the productions of M. Hébert and those of the Dean of the Protestant Faculty. As a leading member of the *Reformed Church*, the author of the *Esquisse* was drawn into an attempt to set forth a complete system of progressive liberalism, which might serve as a basis for a future reorganisation of the Protestant faith. Thus it is that his wide comprehension of subjects is often balanced by thinness of treatment, and that a book, otherwise deeply interest-

ing, is somewhat vague in the impression it leaves on the reader.

M. Hébert belongs to a Church which, like the British Constitution, has its roots in immemorial antiquity, which does not rest on a written confession of faith, whose organic growth is coextensive with the secular evolution of humanity, and whose varied manifestations demand, for their systematisation, the lapse of centuries. It was possible for him to adopt the scientific method of concentrating on a small group of facts, and thus he has been able to arrive at a scientific conclusion.

Biblical Criticism, Comparative Religion, Ecclesiastical History, Theology,

Metaphysics, Psychology, Sociology, are amongst the subjects treated with more or less completeness by M. Sabatier. But it is in his treatment of *dogma* that he comes nearest to scientific attainment. M. Hébert has concentrated on this line of thought, and, as a result, his conclusion is more firmly established and more clearly defined.

In both cases Kant has been the predominating influence; but it seems to the present writer that M. Hébert goes beyond him, while M. Sabatier remains behind him, in the treatment of the great question which the philosopher of Königsberg left unsolved—how to get rid of that dualism which has seemed

inseparable from the history of thought. M. Hébert's treatment of the subject is distinctly original. He personifies the antinomies of reason in the characters of Plato and Darwin, and the solution is reached through the medium of a dialogue in which one of these characters sets out from the standpoint of physical science in its Darwinian stage, and the other from that of philosophy in the strict sense of the word. And that solution is *dogma, formula, symbol.* The world of thought is real in the same sense as the world of matter, and thoughts must be classified as facts are classified. Thoughts represent reality, as sensations represent reality. They, with

their classifications, are subject to evolution, as are material beings with their classifications.

It is here that M. Hébert is in agreement with the most carefully thought out part of M. Sabatier's work. Here, too, he had a forerunner in one of the greatest of our own poets:

> The one remains, the many change and pass:
> Heaven's light for ever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
> Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
> Stains the white radiance of eternity . . . .

In conclusion, there is one fact which the reader should bear in mind. The dialogue moves easily and dramatically forward. The truth of each thought, to

use a Hegelian expression, is to be found in its opposite—that is to say, in the criticism which follows it. The whole, then, can be understood only by those who read it through, and who read it carefully.

The present edition has been especially prepared by the author, and the translation has been made from a copy of the issue of 1893, containing considerable corrections and additions in manuscript. These are for the most part confined to points of style and the production of clearness. In one or two minor instances they are the result of philosophic criticism.

PLATO AND DARWIN

AFTER the noisy Genoa, the silence of Pisa: bustle and tumult give place to quiet and solitude. It is like going from a street into a cloister; one is taken aback, instinctively one's voice is hushed. . . . But when one reaches the other end of the town, that vast deserted forum where stand in solemn isolation those four monuments of art, the Duomo, the Tower, the Campo-Santo, the Bap-

tistery, the stillness of the mental atmosphere is disturbed by a profound emotion. It is like so many apparitions —religion, death, the new life—incarnate in marble. These sublime mysteries take possession of the soul, and no echo of human sound can penetrate the dream of the artist and the thinker.

It was on August 20, 1891. Seated on the steps of the Baptistery, I gazed in tireless admiration at the colonnettes of the Duomo, an exquisite adornment, forming, as it were, a diadem and a necklace of pearls. I dreamt of the Parthenon; I pondered on the evolution of feeling and of thought which had thus drawn heavenward the robust

columns of the ancient temples, making of them an ornament at once simple, graceful and delicate. The heat was stifling: light was streaming from the marbles. Dazzled, I closed my eyes, and soon I slept.

Greek art, evolution—these things pursued me to the land of dreams. . . . All at once I was transported to the Elysian Fields. Over the pale meadow, covered with asphodels, two individuals, broad in forehead and with majestic beard, were slowly approaching. I recognised Plato and Darwin. . . . Soon I was able to distinguish their words.

Plato.—Oh, fire divine sung by Heraclitus, living fire who becomest all

things, primeval ocean in which, as Anaximander says, were moving fish with shining shells, animals, and man himself, thou hadst already a secret presentiment of truth! Darwin, you would smile if I reminded you of the thousand invisible plugs with which, as I thought, the gods adjusted the elements of the human body. I wished to speak as the Sibyls, from inspiration to resolve by mere brainwork a question demanding laborious research and endless observation. All honour to you and to those who are continuing your noble task! How glorious must be the name which you have bequeathed to the earth.

Darwin.—Alas! so many prejudices stood in my path. Routine had got such hold on the minds of men. Glory I did win, but at what a price! I was spared neither derision nor calumny. Ridicule and travesty were aimed at my doctrine. I was an atheist. I, forsooth, who had written the name of the Creator in the first and in the last lines of my work.

Plato.—That is an honour you share with Socrates. But does it matter what people say? One must work for the few, the pioneers of humanity; the multitude will come later. Let us sow the idea broadcast; the harvest will ripen in its own good time. But tell me,

Darwin, What was it that raised apprehensions in pious souls?

Darwin.—Their commonest fault was the taking literally the metaphors and symbols of our sacred books. The Oriental style misled certain minds inclined to seek before all things scientific rigour, or too much accustomed to logical formalism. They failed to distinguish between parable and history; they thought they saw astronomical and geological theses in pages destined to develop the religious and moral life of the soul. But my worst enemies were some of my too zealous disciples; they exaggerated the importance of my doctrine, affirming that it answered

every difficulty, and that it should take the place of all belief.

Plato.—But, as a matter of fact, was not that what you yourself thought?

Darwin.—Not in any sense. I was never tired of repeating that I had neither the time nor the inclination to pause to consider the philosophico-religious question; that I had no talent for such studies; and that, having had no practice in abstract reasoning, I should certainly make a mess of it if I attempted it. Thus I was careful to reserve the question of the first appearance of life. As a starting-point I assumed, without explaining it, the existence of one or more primitive

forms. I avoided all discussion of the origin of material forces and the initial direction of their movement; nevertheless these are presupposed in the ulterior development. I only affirmed that there is no break in continuity in the immense chain which binds all beings to one another, and of which we discover every day some new link. I tried to refer all changes to a single cause: the survival of the fittest in the struggle for life.

Plato.—A mere formal unity! Darwin, did you not compel into this single notion of force realities belonging to entirely different orders?—physical energy, intelligence, beauty?

Darwin.—Time will decide whether I have gone too far in simplifying the problem. I am certain that the fact of successive transformations will one day be universally admitted; possibly my hypothesis as to the actual cause of those changes may be modified and completed.

Plato.—What do you mean by *cause?* When you began to explain your discoveries to me, did you not say that the scientific man should abstain from the search after causes?

Darwin.—There are causes and causes. We give this name, in the sciences, to any phenomenon which is the constant condition of the appear-

ance of another phenomenon : the cooling of the air is the cause of dew, of rain.

Plato.—Then you confine yourself to the phenomenal order, or, what at bottom is the same thing, to sense-presentation. Now, in this way you can know the impression life makes on your organs, on your senses, but not life *as it is in itself.* Yet it is precisely here that the true principle of evolution lies hidden, the true solution of the enigma. The secret is impenetrable ; you cannot rend the veil of Isis.

Darwin.—Such ambition is not mine. Why persist in forcing one's way back to first causes ? It is more profitable to

content oneself with accurately describing the laws, the mechanism.

Plato.—Darwin, do you think all is mechanism?

Darwin.—It is altogether a question of method, Plato, and in no sense an absolute doctrine. I do not at all deny that activity may lie in the inwardness of things, but this inwardness escapes observation; it remains unknowable.

Plato.—Say, rather, it is a mystery; for you speak yourself of an inwardness of things, and one cannot name what is rigorously unknowable. Undoubtedly the terms 'inward,' 'outward,' are, in this use of them, metaphorical; and undoubtedly you cannot think this inward-

ness as forming an idea at once clear and distinct, but at least you vaguely suspect it, you demand its existence.

Darwin.—It is precisely for that reason that I confine myself to the study of the outwardness, the appearance. Yes, as it appears to me, movement, which seems to be the common irreducible element in all phenomena, is one of my sense-presentations; but, as with other sensations, this of movement is as much objective as subjective. Consequently it is true, with that relative truth which alone is within the reach of mankind; and there is this about it which is peculiar, that it can be measured, brought under the rigorous forms of

mathematics. Here, then, we have a *clear and distinct idea*, a precise and defined aspect of reality, the only one which can be of importance to a man of science.

Plato.—Would you at least admit, with Anaxagoras and Empedocles, that a thought, alone, penetrating the universe, might spread everywhere order and harmony? Could not the idea, as the sun from behind a cloud, pierce through phenomena? Are you not convinced, by the daily experience of your conscience, of the existence of an ideal law of *improvement*, which guides the scientist in his research, the artist or the philanthropist in his efforts, which

inspires them and makes them prophets and creators? Is there not a secret spring, an interior force, compelling all things to be according to the laws of rhythm?

Darwin.—Transformations, such as that of shapeless matter into crystal, of coal into diamond, of a tuft of leaves into an exquisite flower, have often plunged me into deep reflection. In any case, I have always been reluctant to admit that a blind necessity would sufficiently explain man, who is at once intelligent and free. No evolution could draw from matter, if we suppose it inanimate and unconscious, consciousness and morality.

Plato.—So Socrates used to say.

But are you not impressed by the wonders of the universe, the astonishing organisation of the human body, and all the various manifestations of divine wisdom and goodness which forced him to recognise and bless Providence?

Darwin.—When I began my researches, during the twenty years which I spent in collecting the facts on which I have since based my theory, my belief in Providence was as strong as that of Socrates. Since then my opinion has undergone considerable fluctuations. I have never denied the existence of God; but if there are moments when the thought that the world could not be the result of chance comes home to me with

crushing force, there are also times when doubt overcomes me, and I ask myself whether there is more preconceived design in the life of organised beings and in natural selection than in the direction of the wind.

Plato.—It is true, Darwin, that nature often seems to act without design A wide field appears to be left to chance. The drops of rain which fall back into the sea have no more finality than certain incipient varieties of animals and plants which come to nothing. But have not the rains, which fall on the earth with singular regularity, a destination in the sustaining of animal and plant life? The same remark would

apply, in my opinion, to those useful variations which are made permanent by selection.

Darwin.—Are you of opinion, then, that every variety in the wild pigeon, from which man by repeated crossing has produced the pouter and the fantail, was originally willed by Providence for man's amusement?

Plato.—Such variations are purely accidental.

Darwin.—So, Plato, are the variations which, when accumulated, have adapted the toes, the beak, and the tongue of the insect-eating woodpecker to the kind of life which has become habitual to it.

Plato.—You admit, at least, that intelligence intervenes in the case of artificial selection. This would prove that mechanism and finality are not incompatible. As to settling the question whether we must place the divine action at the beginning or in the midst of the process of evolution, is it necessary, seeing that for God there is neither before nor after?

Darwin.—But why call in this intervention of a higher power? I see a bird which I would like to hand over to the care of my cook; I kill it: clearly I do this with a purpose. A worthy man takes shelter under a tree; he is struck by lightning: will you maintain that, in

the same sense, God did this with a purpose? I cannot bring myself to admit it. Why, then, should God have decided that this particular swallow should have gulped this particular gnat at this pre-ordained instant of time? And if the death of this gnat was not the result of design, why should its birth, or the formation of the first gnat, be explained differently?

Plato.—You bring to the discussion of this matter the principle of all or nothing in a way which seems to me exaggerated. You ought, if you are consistent, seeing that games depend largely on chance, to deny the skill and the intelligence of the players.

Darwin.—I deny nothing; I affirm nothing. I simply don't know.

Plato.—It is pleasant, Darwin, to hear from your lips the favourite maxim of him who was my master. But he used to add, 'Know thyself!' If you do not find God in the world, seek Him in your reason and in your conscience. Turn from phantoms and shadows; purify the eye of your mind with quiet meditation; a ray of light will come to you of wonderful clearness, not to be confounded with any other in brightness. Idea of the infinite, instinct of the perfect, of the ideal, sense of the divine, it matters not how you name it; you will never explain this notion, this

desire, unless you posit a perfect? whose mysterious influence is over you. Darwin, do you not think that the intellectual life is as natural as the physical?

Darwin.—Certainly.

Plato.—Then these two forms of life should be subject to the great law of adaptation. Is not the intelligence an organ of the mind?

Darwin.—You would compel me to admit that the mind has been adapted to its circumstances.

Plato.—Undoubtedly; setting aside imaginative ideas, the inventions of fantasy, it may be said that every simple irreducible idea expresses the

essential relations which bind the mind to the great all of which it is a part. Otherwise we must separate the mind from the universe, making of it a world apart, an exclusive kingdom with special laws and a privileged constitution.

Darwin.—The separation of movement and thought, the opposition between world and soul, are mere abstractions, useful at best in facilitating certain kinds of work, the special researches of the scientist and the philosopher. Nature cannot be divided. In reality we can no more take away any individual from the all, any part from the whole, than isolate height, breadth, and depth.

Plato.—Then you realise the intimate unity of all the particulars which form the universe?

Darwin.—I would willingly thus describe the universal filiation of things and their reciprocal attraction. I would look on the world as an immense organism, in which all is active and living, in which a single force is manifested in a thousand ways, attempting every possible combination, grotesque or harmonious, bringing together, grouping elementary forms round a central principle of activity, thus producing types more and more complex and endowed with greater and greater complexity of life.

Plato.—So you see, Darwin, it is not easy to hold to phenomena. Thought, completed by instinct and imagination, symbol and hypothesis, regains its sway. I am aware of the insuperable difficulties which beset philosophers when they wish to explain how things substantially distinct from one another can mutually influence, can know, one another. Knowledge, my disciple Aristotle was fond of saying, can only be explained by a common act of the knowing and the known. But can there be a common act where there is not a common substance? Why, then, attribute excessive value to individual distinctions? If, on the other hand,

we look on nature as a colossal tree, on which all of us are flowers and leaves, a solution to the problem is suggested. Representations and the great universe are manifestations of a single law: useful representations alone persist, and those are the most useful which best adapt activity to the essential conditions of existence.

Darwin.—Ideas are then true, from a practical point of view, in so far as they guide and restrain our activity in relation to other objects? Are they not portraits of reality?

Plato.—Adaptation is not likeness. Is there any resemblance between a harmonious sound and the vibrations of the

strings of a lyre? The terms 'representation,' 'image,' etc., deceive us; it is not a question of portraits, but of symbols, of signs—insufficient from the standpoint of curiosity, ample as a guide to action. Every simple idea, then, is the expression of the relation between the mind and reality. Now, if there be such a simple, irreducible idea, it is assuredly that which we render by the words 'infinite,' 'perfect,' 'divine.'

Darwin.—Is that quite true, Plato? If I count up all the qualities of the things which surround me, if I drive further and further back the limits which contain them, shall I not thus arrive at the infinite?

Plato.—No; you will come to *indefinite* progression, not the infinite.

Darwin.—And if I suddenly suppress the limits?

Plato.—You will have the unlimited, the indetermined.

Darwin.—Would it not rather be *being* of such a kind that it can have no limits?

Plato.—The words 'of such a kind,' which you are forced to use, veil the idea which we wish to explain. You introduce this idea without noticing it; you thus substitute to your finite representations the ideal which lies hidden in the depths of your soul, at the centre of your thought, of your heart.

Darwin.—But what adaptation is presupposed in such an idea?

Plato.—If the real world did not contain the idea—which is, as it were, the soul of it—if it were composed only of imperfect particulars, there would be no proportion between this foreign notion and the circumstances to which it adapts us. Only such ideas as 'unlimited,' 'indefinite,' 'universality,' 'totality' would have grown up in our minds. Now, none of these are identical with the idea of 'the perfect.' But this notion must have a sufficient reason in reality, and such a sufficient reason we name '*God.*' Would you attribute to the notion of the perfect' less value than to the sensa-

tions of sight, of hearing, of touch?—adaptations of an inferior order, but which are enough to convince you of the existence of the world.

Darwin.—What if sensations, ideas, were but an illusive dream, an empty shadow?

Plato.—A man of your mental power cannot be long content with such a supposition, a mere intellectual plaything. A dreamer may succeed in enshrouding himself in his impressions, and in persuading himself that these are the universe; this I can understand. But a practical man, a true man, who not only thinks, but acts, cannot be a dupe to such subtleties. The ideal, the knowledge

of which, however vague, is as it were the special constitutive principle of humanity, that ideal which gives direction to man's moral and intellectual activity, has forsooth less value than the activity itself. If he refuses his adhesion, his belief, it can only be by violating his inner self; he believes then, in the same degree, in God and the external world, not in virtue of logical arguments, valid only in the sphere of abstraction, but as the result of a conclusion in the order of practical, living experience: he feels himself *adapted* to God and to the world.

Darwin.—An ingenious and unexpected conclusion from my theory; but

permit me, Plato, to explain to you the true motive of my hesitations, to recall to your mind the formidable objection which I have often heard from the lips alike of the ignorant and of the learned, and which often occurred to me in my own study of nature: if God is perfect, why are there pain and evil in the world?

Plato.—Then you think the world *is* bad?

Darwin.—To suppress one of the elements in a problem is not to solve it. The dark side of things should not make us forget all that is good and beautiful on the earth. If evil had predominated over good in nature, individuals, absorbed by suffering, would long ago

have ceased to propagate their species. On the whole one can say, speaking generally, that the organisation of the universe is beneficent. But think of the individuals crushed by pain! Think of the paw of the tiger, the claws of the eagle, the teeth of the panther! Singular inventions for a God who is good!

Plato.—Why thus, unreflectingly and without restriction, affirm that nature is the work of God? If God fashioned things as a potter fashions a vase, assuredly the paw of the tiger, the claws of the eagle, and the teeth of the panther remain inexplicable. But has not nature played an active part in her

own evolution? Is she not fundamentally endowed with spontaneity and intelligence—obscure in the instinct of animals, more evident in the reason and freedom of man, and which perhaps may be clothed in many other forms of consciousness? Then why not distinguish between what results from the free exercise of this spontaneity, that for which nature alone is responsible, and what comes from God?—for example, the primitive energies whence is derived, to use your own expression, the organisation, usually beneficent, of the universe?

Darwin.—The old way of describing the origin of things is so ingrained in

men's minds that I myself often find it difficult to get rid of it.

Plato.—Would you have preferred a purely mechanical world? Such an automaton would have offered no real interest. Besides, to give freedom to a being without allowing him the use of it would be the merest mockery. God had to give free play to the spontaneity of nature. If nature has developed according to a plan very incompletely representing the divine intention, God is not responsible.

Darwin.—Undoubtedly, but does not the responsibility fall chiefly on man?

Plato.—The disorders, the sufferings,

which man has brought and still brings into the world, are, alas! incalculable. Is not a war often more destructive than an epidemic? But we must not exaggerate. Man is determined at any price to convince himself that he is the centre of the universe, and to resolve from his own standpoint the awful problem of the existence of evil. I myself have described how, as a punishment for her faults, the soul lost her wings and fell into the body. Now, such an allegory in no way explains why suffering, disease, and death invaded the world millions and millions of years before the appearance of man. We must try to find a deeper solution, a

more radical explanation, a *truly original* sin, to justify the misery of man and brute. Do you think, Darwin, everything considered, that suffering *is* an evil?

Darwin.—Certainly it is hard to conceive conscious life without desire. Now, desire presupposes privation; and privation, suffering. Within certain limits, then, suffering is beneficent; in this way it entered into the divine plan. But is it possible without revolt—I had almost said, without blasphemy—to listen to the groans of the sheep torn by the wolf, the howls of the wolf wounded by the hunter, or the cries of impotent anguish uttered by the sick man devoured by cancer?

Plato.—Whence comes this excess of suffering, if not from the very exaggeration of sensibility? Pleasure and pain in moderation would have played a beneficent part in the universe. But nature has not accepted these conditions. She wished to taste more and more of enjoyment; she has given incomparable delicacy to the organs of sensibility; she has created nerves with a capacity for every form of pleasure and intoxication: but these instruments of refined enjoyment have become, for that very reason, instruments of acute suffering. Excessive enjoyment, excessive suffering, such is the law which nature has chosen.

98873

Darwin.—Can she at least throw off the chains which she has forged for herself?

Plato.—Undoubtedly she can if man decides no more to live turned in upon himself, absorbed in the thought of his insignificant personality. It rests with him to listen to the universal moaning, to raise up in his heart an altar to pity. It rests with him to introduce into the world more reason, more order, harmony, happiness. His part is not to copy nature, to return to nature, but to engage in an energetic struggle against evil, to guide the evolution of nature in the direction of the ideal.

Darwin.—Do you believe that progress will one day be realised?

Plato.—You yourself, Darwin, have taught me that man, some thousands of years ago, did not exist. Think of the ferocious, indecent animal which preceded him! Who at that time could have foreseen the existence of a Solon, of a Homer, an Æschylus, or a Socrates? No doubt the mass of humanity still stands on the threshold of its evolution, but there are moments when it falls under the divine influence, the attractive force of justice and of truth. Like Galatæa—half-statue, half-woman—humanity has but partially disengaged itself from the primitive animality. If

the metamorphosis is still incomplete, it is because nature continues to oppose the mad desire for enjoyment to the divine attraction; but little by little, thanks to the victories of our freedom, the metamorphosis is taking place.

Darwin.—Are you not bewitching yourself with a vain hope?

Plato.—Turn your attention rather to the marvellous transformation, the refining, of our grossest and most imperious instincts. Not a slave but knows that we make a distinction between the heavenly and the popular Venus. How far apart are egotistical sensuality and true love or friendship founded on respect and esteem! Already the pure

metal is separating itself from the dross; an exquisite feeling is evolving from dull sensation. And art? is not this also a passing deliverance from the tyranny of sense? The movement of the brute, drawn by vulgar desire, there gives place to serene contemplation, to the calm enjoyment of beauty. Do you not think that Socrates was free from all dubious desire when he spoke with Aspasia or Tneodotus, and when he admired Alcibiades? Now, could not such progress, Darwin, more and more marked, modify hereditary habits in so far as they are defective, and bring into the world a new race of man, as far sur-

passing the present generation as Socrates himself his bestial precursors?

Darwin.—That is a secret which lies hidden in the future. Certain animal species, endowed at one time with incomparable richness of forms, have disappeared beyond recall. The same fate, perhaps, awaits the human race. But does it concern us, since, as you say, this is but one of the phenomenal representations of that mysterious nature for which no progress, no effort, is lost? Let us not dwell on problems which are insoluble. Explain to me rather the distinction you make between 'the perfect' and God.

Plato.—None, I assure you. But,

Darwin, do you not realise how small an influence is exercised, in the present stage of our evolution, by pure ideas? Myths and allegories are necessary, not only to slaves and to the people, but to philosophers and men of science, that the *felt* attraction of pleasure may be met by a *felt* attraction of the good. Thus they make for truth with their whole soul, and with every advantage in the struggle for moral life.

Darwin.—But can the ignorant distinguish the image from the idea?

Plato.—It hardly matters. It is enough if they assimilate the idea through the image, if they feel its vivifying influence. Now, God is 'the

perfect,' 'the infinite,' clothed in the image of human personality—an image very superior in efficacity (so far, at least) to that of an *ideal law* which you no doubt would prefer. Suppress the human image, and there remains only an abstract idea, without the least power of action on the mass; if, on the other hand, you maintain it, 'the infinite' has a real place in your life, intimately penetrating it, for it appeals not less to the heart than to the intellect. You can adore God, pray to Him, listen to His voice in conscience.

Darwin.—But do you not thus distort the pure idea of divinity? Do you

not make God in your own image and likeness?

Plato.—No; only just as we say 'God is infinitely wise, infinitely good,' so we must say 'God is infinitely personal.' *Goodness, wisdom, personality*, here we have the image; *infinite*, this is the idea—or, if you will, feeling, instinct.

Darwin.—Then why trouble about formulas? Let us be satisfied with feeling.

Plato.—Doubtless feeling is the force, the life. Isolated from feeling, whence it is drawn and separated by abstraction, the idea is but an empty form. Darwin, have you asked yourself what would

have happened if nature, committing herself to another course, had evolved exclusively in the direction of feeling? The varied expressions of physiognomy, gestures, cries, music with its endless combinations of harmonious sound, would then alone have given utterance to the inward dream. But the twilight of dreamland was not sufficient for nature. You yourself have pointed out to me how she has perfected those marvellous systems of nervous centres; how she has concentrated, condensed, in the human brain those uncertain lights which are called 'instinct' and 'imagination.' The idea was born, and with the idea speech; and speech gave birth to formulas; for,

Darwin, we must classify ideas as we classify animals and plants.

Darwin.—Certainly, but classifications have never more than a provisional value; they are subject to endless change, as succeeding approximations, with ever-increasing exactitude, to reality. Would you allow, Plato, that this should be so in the case of philosophical formulas?

Plato.—Woe to him who would lay down a formula as a limit in the way of human progress and say, 'Thou shalt go no farther.' There is no such thing as a final formula, as there is no such thing as a final symbol. Besides, what are formulas but symbols of a higher

order whose elements are borrowed from consciousness? Those ideas of *substance*, of *cause*, which you find in yourself, and which you then apply by analogy to God and to the world, are symbols. Such irreducible ideas also as *time*, *space*, *number*, *infinite*, are symbols.

Darwin.—But surely number is an exception. If number is but a practical adaptation of the intellect, we fall back into chaos; God is no longer distinct from the world, the soul from the body.

Plato.—Confound God and the world! Make of Him the sum of all existing things, the great *all!* I should

never fall into such an error, Darwin. I am too convinced that it is impossible to refer the idea of 'the infinite,' of 'the perfect,' to any adaptation of mind to imperfect things. But to distinguish is not to separate. Assuredly I cannot establish a distinction without introducing a certain numerical separation, but I am not the dupe of the laws of my thought, and, if you remember, I do not take an idea for a likeness. Do you realise, Darwin, whence comes to you this notion of unity and plurality, of which you seem so fond?

Darwin.—Unity? Why, it is seen everywhere: *a* tree, *a* stone.

Plato.—These are composite, Darwin.

Your body, your brain, each drop of your blood, is compound; thought alone is one. It is thought which gives unity to phenomena, and which makes it possible for you to collect into a single consciousness, and to compare one with another, the most diverse ideas. And nevertheless, when you enter into the innermost recesses of yourself, how prodigious is the number of impressions, of feelings, of acts of every kind! This whirlwind, this manifold, which is often so difficult to bring together, to centralise, is still yourself. The same being, then, appears as one and as many. Besides, is it not at once simple, identical with itself, and nevertheless complex?—a

compound of relations in extension and in succession, consequently in space and out of space, in time and out of time? What is this statement but the admission that the true reality, the activity which is exhausted by no phenomenon, and which is vaguely suspected by consciousness, must be fundamentally independent of the laws of the presentation of phenomena, of number, of space and time?

Darwin.—But what becomes of the individual in your hypothesis?

Plato.—What becomes of the species in your system? 'Species,' 'individual,' 'multiplicity,' 'unity,' such words have their full value only in the world of

appearances. It is the customary, the hereditary, forms of thought which occasion these oppositions; reality reconciles them. What may correspond to number, to space and time, in the impenetrable beyond, who can say? As to the essence of our true personality, which you seek to know, remember that a free being is every day creating himself; that his effort constitutes a portion—small, no doubt, but real—of the great work of evolution. And why should I be surprised, Darwin, at your self-questionings? The one and the many? How often, formerly, did not I myself plunge into that problem! How often did I not sigh for the dis-

appearance of the phantom of quantity, or of the abyss into which, it seemed, what was best in me would vanish at death, beyond recall! I mistook the shade of Helen for the true Helen, the practical laws of thought for absolute reality. Provisional adaptations I made the measure of the possible.

Darwin.—But then what becomes of philosophy?

Plato.—The rational being, Darwin, will always seek to justify and to explain his instincts. The essential point is, never to separate speculation from practice. Philosophy should be, before all things, as Socrates desired, the love of wisdom, the cultivation of our higher

feelings, of those disinterested tendencies which win men back from vulgar enjoyments, giving dignity and value to life.

Darwin.—Are you really convinced that philosophy has an influence on the moral evolution of humanity?

Plato.—Certainly, if, like Socrates, the philosopher sets more store by examples than by words. But how rare, how superficial often, is the influence of the philosopher even on his dearest disciples! I call to mind the banquet of Agathon, where I heard Aristophanes and Alcibiades discourse eloquently on love. Alas! how many indecencies, how many infamies, lay hidden under

their high-sounding words! It was as if a purple veil had been thrown over a gaping wound. When the feast ended in a brutal orgie, I went away sadly. 'What a distance,' I thought, 'separates art from virtue!' Beauty, divine splendour, when wilt thou reach the heart, the soul of things, not merely colouring the surface of them with a brilliancy which is passing and deceptive? When wilt thou be the end, sought for itself, the true end, not a mirage thrown by nature for her own purposes before the eyes of man? O humanity! who, not wishing to kill desire in thee, shall teach thee to direct it? not cursing joy, shall make thee learn to ennoble it?

Who shall cause to shine before thee an ideal so pure that a life of mere instinct will seem hateful, that remorse will accompany every fall! It is true a saying comes back to me of Glaucus to Socrates: 'If the Just One were to appear on the earth, He would be disowned, insulted, scourged, crucified. Yes, but He would draw all to Himself; He would group around Him all noble souls, softly moved, fascinated by the incomparable light shining forth from a conscience full of God!

Darwin.—Alas! His teaching would soon be imprisoned in narrow formulas borrowed from popular beliefs or from purely human systems. Too often the

letter would kill the spirit. Opponents and persecutors would arise. But in spite of them, and even through them—for does gold cease to be gold in passing through clumsy or unworthy hands?—the divine ideal would persist in the world: Justice and Charity!

Plato.—What is charity?

Suddenly I heard a great sound, as of a rushing wind or waves broken against the rocks. I awoke. The bells were loudly pealing. I walked towards the Duomo. 'Oh,' I said to myself, 'if Plato had known the Christ!' I went in. In the mysterious depths of the temple rose an altar, resplendent with reflected

light from the golden arches and the columns of antique marble. I listened, and I heard these words :—

> Sub diversis speciebus
> Signis tantum et non rebus
> Latent res eximiæ !

I started. It was a complete expression of my own thoughts. Appearances, signs, symbols, which veil the mysterious reality, but which nevertheless adapt us to it, so that it penetrates us and makes us live—is not this one of the essential elements of all faith and of all philosophy?

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